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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ALLEVIATING THE FOOD CRISIS IN AFRICA

1. This document gives a summary of a study entitled "The role of women in alleviating the food crisis in Africa", prepared within the framework of the United Nations Decade for Women and the implementation of the Lagos Plan of Action. This study follows on the recommendations of the Lagos Plan of Action which requires, in paragraphs 316 and 323, that research be undertaken on women as food producers, and that there be a continuous effort to "promote the recognition and documentation on the contribution of women in agriculture in so far as their productive activities contribute to the gross national product, particularly in terms of foodstuffs." This study is divided into three parts: the role of women in agriculture; the problem of water; the problem of wood.

I. The role of women in agriculture

2. The African economy is based essentially on agriculture and men, like women, participate in agricultural production. Unfortunately this participation is difficult to quantify because, in general, there are no accurate agricultural statistics, and where some statistics exist there is no separate data on women. To fill this gap the United Nations encourages, at the present time, the collection of precise data, insisting on information on the economic and social role of women in society, and in particular in the agricultural sector.

Characteristics of the agricultural sector

3. As in the other continents, African has known periods of famine. But towards the sixties it had almost reached self-sufficiency in food production as measured by the proportion of food needs covered by internal production. In 1962-1964 this rate was estimated at 98 per cent. Unfortunately, ten years later, in 1972-1974, the rate was down to 90 per cent, and in 1980 it was 86 per cent.

4. During the same period, 1970-1980, the newly-developing industrialization had only limited results. Contrary to expectations, the change from a subsistence economy to a market economy, which would have prompted an increase in agricultural production, showed slow growth and poor productivity in the agricultural sector. For example, the average yield for cereal cultivation is 1000 kg/ha, whereas the average world yield is 2000 kg/ha. The average yield for the production of tubers and root crops is 7 tonnes/ha while the world average is 11 tonnes/ha.

5. FAO statistics further illustrate the food crisis by showing that the rate of growth for the years 1970-1980 has average 1.3 per cent per annum, whereas food production has decreased by on average of 1 per cent per annum. In the course of the same period 1969/1971 and 1980, imports have increased more than six-fold in value, reaching 8 billion US dollars compared with 1.2 billion in 1969-1971. In addition the calorie intake of 20 per cent of the African population is below the critical threshold, and of the 43 countries to which the World Food Programme gives priority for food aid allocation, 26 are on the African continent.

6. Faced with this reversal of the anticipated food prospects of the continent, and especially the decrease in food production, the Lagos Plan of Action has issued the challenge of utilising all available resources in order to be able to satisfy, in the near future, the food needs of the continent without recourse to imports and food aid.

7. Although this food crisis is part of a general world recession, the decrease in food production and productivity, as well as the rate of self-sufficiency in food, can be explained by the phenomena below, which have brought about, in one way or another, this downward trend:

- the large demographic growth;
- the exodus of young people and men to the towns, attracted by wage-earning employment;
- deterioration of the land;
- natural calamities such as drought, floods;
- the use of archaic tools. Modern techniques of agricultural production are only used in a few large, commercial enterprises while the small farmer has to make do with only a hoe;
- the major part of agricultural investments are directed towards the production of products for export, to the detriment of the small producer;
- the price of food products is low and gives no incentive for the small farmer to increase production;
- marketing networks are often not well organized and do not encourage the small producer;
- the policy of importation can reduce the demand for local products in that, in general, urban consumers prefer imported goods, which are of better quality, to local goods;
- generally speaking, farmers, and more especially female farmers, do not participate in the formulation of agricultural policies.

8. Having ascertained the decrease in agricultural production and productivity, as well as the rate of self-sufficiency in food, and the causes of these, the following chapters will show the role played by African women in the economic system of the continent in general, and in particular in the food-producing sector, as well as their contribution to a solution of the world food crisis.

Women in the rural working population of Africa

9. In 1982, out of a total population in Africa of some 466 million, the female population exceeded that of the male by .49 per cent. However, if one takes into account those of working age (15 to 64 years) women outnumber men.

10. In African societies, the role of women in productive work differs from that of the other continents. Contrary to the traditional practices of other societies, African women have always taken an active part in agricultural production. According to ILO statistics, there are two distinct systems in Africa, depending upon the social and cultural structure of the individual country:

- Africa south of the Sahara, where the female population effectively engaged in agricultural work is more than a third of the total working population. (ILO estimates an average of 33.5 per cent whereas FAO estimates show 47.2 per cent).

- Africa north of the Sahara, as well as those countries with a similar culture, where the participation of women in agriculture is estimated at a little more than 13 per cent, on average.

11. It should also be pointed out that Ruth B. Dixon, author of the article "Women in Agriculture", gives much higher figures than those of ILO and FAO. She estimates that the figures for women working in agriculture could reach 30 per cent in North Africa, and that for women in the countries south of the Sahara they are more than 50 per cent, and at times even exceed 60 per cent. In her article, Ruth Dixon indicates that for the whole of Africa south of the Sahara, women form 45.9 per cent of the total rural working population, the highest ratio of any developing region.

12. It must be understood that all these statistics do not give an exact figure of the actual participation of African women in the agricultural sector. These statistics do not take account of the fact that rural African women begin their working life very young and often continue working beyond the age of 65. The workload of African women is also affected by the exodus of men from the rural areas to the towns, leaving the women with the full burden of agricultural work. A survey carried out by ILO in 1975 showed that 3.6 million young girls, from 10-14 years, were economically active in Africa, and represented 16 per cent of the world's working population in this age group. Again, 1.3 million African women older than 65 were still working, and they constituted 2.6 per cent of the total female working population, with an activity rate of 19.8 per cent.

Work carried out by women in agricultural production

13. African women can be found in the preparation of the soil, sowing, weeding and harvesting of cash crops and food crops, but in general, women have a larger, and almost entire, responsibility for the production of foodstuffs such as cereals, vegetables, roots and tubers.

14. This division of labour came about when colonial regimes introduced crops for export (coffee, cotton, cocoa). These new crops immediately became the object of monetary speculation, and men left the production of food crops to their wives in order to concentrate on more profitable crops . In the regions which were not suitable for cultivation of these export crops, the men left cultivation to their wives and went in search of wage-earning employment in the towns.

15. Women are also found in the spheres of storage, preparation and marketing of foodstuffs. These responsibilities, which are in addition to their daily domestic chores, only serve to increase their burden. However, it must be recognized that the grain mills, which are widely seen throughout the towns, and in the larger population centres, have lightened these chores. However, this technology has not yet reached the majority of rural women.

16. As far as marketing is concerned, yet again the practice in the Muslim countries of North Africa differs from that of the other African countries. In Africa south of the Sahara, this role belongs to the women. The men participate rarely, or only when it is a matter of wholesale selling, or in cattle sales. On the other hand, in North Africa, marketing is essentially a male occupation, but in some cases, women may carry out small trading from their homes.

Agricultural development policies and the integration of rural women in development

17. Although the continent is already conscious of the need to integrate women into development, some political leaders still do not recognise the full contribution women make in agriculture. As a result women farmers do not receive the attention they deserve.

18. In African tradition, where a woman does not inherit land, the African women were deprived of the most important input of production. In those countries which still respect these practices, although the women are allowed to work the land, they have no right to make decisions, either on the use of the land itself or on the profits gained.

19. Furthermore, women still use rudimentary technology. Their tools are the hoe or the digging stick, whereas the work undertaken by men, such as clearing the land, is mechanised.

20. The differentiation makes itself felt even when male and female farmers utilise the same methods of production. A study carried out in Botswana, where animal-assisted cultivation is fairly general, shows that 59 per cent of women-headed households do not have access to animal traction, whereas for families with a male head of household, only 28 per cent do not use animal traction.

21. Women find it difficult to get loans under the present credit system. The commercial banks basically grant credit to men, who have land to offer as collateral; the agricultural development banks give credit to the heads of households, who are often male, and the other financial institutions have high interest rates.

22. Furthermore, in those countries where women's rights are recognised, their voices are not heard because they are often in a minority in the village or co-operative councils.

23. To remedy this situation, women must participate to the same extent as men: (a) in the choice of work to be mechanised; (b) in the adaptation of new technologies to the needs of peasant cultivation; (c) in the granting of credit, which will allow new technology to be introduced

Future prospects for women in the agricultural sector

24. Since the beginning of the United Nations Decade for Women, international organizations have worked to ensure that governments recognise the role of women in development and take this into account when formulating their development plans.

25. Several measures which could be taken to improve the working conditions of rural women and allow them to achieve better productivity and a definite improvement in agricultural production are:

a) the improvement of technology by the diffusion of upgraded cultivation techniques; the improvement of tools; the availability to women farmers of improved, high-yielding seeds; chemical and organic fertiliser, pesticides and other methods of plant protection, locally manufactured if possible, and the development of appropriate technology;

b) access to training programmes for agriculture, home economics and co-operative techniques;

c) the reform of extension services to orient them more towards women producers;

d) the creation of agricultural co-operatives for production, marketing and consumption, and to provide credit facilities for rural women;

e) improvement of the legal status of women, particularly with regard to their access to land and their right to inherit property; equality of employment and equality of remuneration;

f) collection, analysis and dissemination of information concerning the contribution women make to the economy in general, and to the agricultural sector in particular;

g) the active participation of rural women in rural institutions and organizations, and in the decision-making process on matters affecting them.

26. As has been underlined above, the role of rural African women is so important in agricultural production in general, and food production in particular, that every effort aimed at improving the productivity of rural women, and increasing their output, would contribute automatically and to a large measure towards rural development, as well as a solution to the food crisis. African governments should take note of the problems of women at all levels because, not only are they producers, but they are also the mothers of the children who will build the Africa of tomorrow.

II. The problem of water

27. There is no need to demonstrate the vital importance of water to all life, human, animal or vegetable. Water is essential for good food and the good health of the population. Water is one of the principal factors in agricultural and industrial production.

28. In the following paragraphs we will study the problem of water from two angles: water for domestic use and water for agricultural purposes.

Water for domestic use

29. With resolution 35/81 of 10 November 1980, the General Assembly of the United Nations has proclaimed the years 1981-1990 as the International Decade for Potable Water and Hygiene. One of the objectives given for the decade was the supply of potable water and of sanitary arrangements for all zones, rural and urban, by the year 1990.

30. Because of the crucial importance of the problem of supplying good water, States have made every effort to attain this objective. In general, every town is to have a central distribution system which guarantees the cleanliness of the water.

The problem is still acute in the rural areas. Indeed, the great majority of rural people drink water from springs, rivers or streams which is often far from clean. This leads to problems of health and exhaustion, because the water is often far away, and sometimes to problems with migration when water sources dry up. It is important to realize that this situation has much more effect on rural women because they are the ones who must fetch the water. To solve this problem it is also necessary to improve the working conditions of rural women and to lighten their workload.

31. Several methods have been tried to resolve this problem. Certain States have tried using filters in rural areas, but without success. In the Sahel countries, where the situation is catastrophic because of the drought, they have adopted intensive programmes of borehole and well drilling.

32. African States will have to concentrate considerable efforts to this task because according to the Secretary-General's report at the 35th Session of the General Assembly, 343 million inhabitants in Africa lacked adequate access to water in 1980. Taking into account the population increase by 1990, estimated at 183 million inhabitants, it will be necessary to give access to potable water to 526 million inhabitants, two-thirds of whom are the rural population, and provide sanitary facilities for 571 million individuals. The same report estimated the African urban population served by water distribution and sanitation at 71 per cent and 56 per cent respectively, while in rural areas the population served was estimated at 25 per cent and 15 per cent respectively.

33. Water and sanitary installations will cost the States a great deal of money. Moreover, the population will have to be educated as to their proper use. It should be emphasized that these installations will be beneficial to the rural population, especially to the rural women, because not only will they no longer be affected by diseases transmitted by unclean water, but in addition they will be able to devote more time to productive activities.

Water for agricultural use

34. Water is indispensable for agricultural production. When rains are insufficient, or are excessive, man is obliged to resort to irrigation or drainage schemes which allow him to increase or control the yield of the land.

35. In 1980, it was observed that 50-60 per cent of the increase of the previous 20 years arose from new or renewed irrigation areas, while irrigated areas represented only two per cent of the cultivated areas. Unfortunately, irrigation requires investments which are too costly and the scarcity of water demands considerable attention and very careful control. Women have, for a long time, used irrigation on a small scale to raise crops in the humid lowlands, for market garden production and for paddy field cereals (rice). In previous times these lands were less sought after and their yield was higher than in the unflooded lands. However, more and more, these low-lying lands have been taken over by men for irrigation.

III. The problem of wood

36. Wood is an important source of energy. It is used as a fuel for domestic consumption and sometimes makes up the total energy consumption of some countries, when the latter have no other sources of energy.

37. In rural areas of Africa, wood is practically the only fuel used on a large scale. The contribution of wood to the total energy needs of countries depends on the existence of other sources of energy. For example, in Algeria, an oil-producing country, it represents only 1.9 per cent of total energy whereas in Ethiopia it represents 97 per cent.

38. In Africa, the poor management of available wood resources, as well as domestic pressures and the market economy, linked to an urbanisation in full expansion, have profoundly reduced the production and even the extent of forests and woods. In addition, the extravagant cutting of trees, and with it the destruction of a fragile ecosystem, has contributed significantly to the dangers of desertification of the continent. This danger of desertification is illustrated by the world map of desertification presented to the United Nations Conference on Desertification. The map shows that 55 per cent of land in Africa is either already desert or risks becoming desert.

39. To cope with this situation and to allow the rural and poor urban population a minimum of comfort, the countries most deficient in wood have undertaken the following actions:

1. to develop and distribute more efficient cookers. The traditional pot on three stones has an energy efficiency of three to eight per cent, whereas an enclosed oven utilises 50 per cent of the heat produced. The improvement in energy efficiency should produce a wood economy of at least 50 to 100 per cent which, it is hoped, will result in the safeguarding of a part of the woods and forests;

2. to plant trees which have rapid growth. The efforts made so far are far from fulfilling the requirements, and the programme would benefit from support by initiatives from the private, collective and individual sectors;

3. research into alternative forms of energy, especially in areas severely affected, notably in the Sahel. In this respect the use of solar energy continues to be studied. Meanwhile Mauritania has popularised the use of butane gas among its peoples. The danger of desertification must be seen on a regional basis and actions undertaken on an adequate scale.

Conclusion

40. It has been shown above that the food crisis has been the result of a decrease in food production. The production problem constitutes a two-fold deficiency: that of technology in the face of the needs to be satisfied, and that of human factors. The section of the population benefitting from the various investments and upgraded technology already introduced is not the one which can make the maximum contribution to agricultural production. It is known that women are active in food production but for the most part they do not have direct access to the land, training, popularisation, modern inputs and still less to credit. If this situation continues, production, as the rate of self-sufficiency in food, runs the risk of being reduced even further.

41. Consequently, African States must take measures with a view to:

- promote and facilitate access by the greatest number of people, especially women producers, to land and to water;

- encourage scientific research in agricultural technology and the dissemination of popular techniques;

- allocate more resources to the development of the agricultural sector and to the improvement of living conditions in rural areas;

- ensure the participation of the population, especially women, in decision making, in the choice and the execution of local, national and regional programmes;

- encourage large-scale reforestation pr ogrammes and research on the economic use of the available wood, as well as the development and popularisation of alternative forms of energy.